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Particulate pollution respects no city limits

By Traci Watson, USA TODAY

BALTIMORE — High above a busy downtown street, \$200,000 worth of equipment sniffs the air, searching for a deadly form of pollution called fine particulate. And it's never too hard to find.

Today is no different.

A monitor shows that the fine-particulate level is "Code Yellow" — a moderate level of particulate pollution.

The monitoring station "tells us that (particulate levels) are right at or just above the levels of the national standard," says David Krask, who oversees air-quality monitoring for the state of Maryland. "That's true for most of the monitors in the city."

Baltimore is not alone in having a particulate problem. On Tuesday, the Environmental Protection Agency said that 62 million people live in communities where particulate levels rose to unhealthy levels at least once in 2003. (**Related story:** [Particle pollution falls 10% in 4 years](#))

If the EPA declares Friday that Baltimore has failed to meet federal goals for particulate levels, it won't be alone.

A preliminary EPA list includes more than 200 counties across the USA that failed to comply with particulate limits. Those on the final list due Friday will be required to enact stringent plans to clean up their dirty air.

Every community gets pollution from different sources and must decide how it will attack the problem. Baltimore is typical of many cities. It has fine-particulate levels near the middle of the range — higher than New York City's, lower than Fresno's. And like many other places, Baltimore gets a good chunk of its particulate from other states.

The pollution that blows into the city "is typically not enough by itself to get to Code Orange or Code Red range," says William Ryan, an air-quality forecaster at Pennsylvania State University. "But with the local pollution, it can get you there."

So the city can serve as a rough microcosm for the particulate problem across the nation. And its experience shows it may not be as easy to clean up as federal authorities hope.

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According to EPA data, Baltimore experienced unhealthy levels of fine particulate on 14 days. That's no minor concern in a city with a significant elderly population and very high number of people with asthma.

BAD AIR DAYS

Counties that had the most days with unhealthy levels of particle pollution in 2003, according to the EPA:

Rank	County	State	Days
1	Imperial	Calif.	82
2	Riverside	Calif.	56
3	Fresno	Calif.	53
4	Kern	Calif.	47
5	Cook	Ill.	43
6	Allegheny	Pa.	37
7	Los Angeles	Calif.	35
8	Tulare	Calif.	22
9	Cuyahoga	Ohio	21
10	Montgomery	Ohio	20

places that fail to meet U.S. particulate rules. Baltimore, however, hasn't protested. The air is too clear.

"We have to be respectful of what the data shows," says Thomas Snyder, director of air pollution for the Maryland Department of the Environment.

The city's situation is due in large part to forces beyond its control. Two-thirds to three-quarters of the particulate blows in from places hundreds of miles away, including power plants in the Ohio River Valley and traffic jams in Atlanta, Philadelphia and other cities up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

In 2002, forest fires in Quebec produced smoke that drifted down to the city. Scientists at Hopkins University found that the smoke led to particulate levels higher than the federal limit, and it infiltrated the bedrooms of the city's children.

But that doesn't mean the city doesn't add to its own problems. It is encircled by wide interstates and highways full of diesel trucks, and despite the sharp decline of its industrial sector, it still has factories that emit particulate.

As a result, both the city and the places surrounding it will have to clean up for Baltimore's particulate problem.

"The fact is, you can't solve the problem with local reductions alone, and you can't solve it with regional reductions alone," says Jeffrey Stehr, a researcher at the University of Maryland who studies Maryland's air pollution.

The EPA recently finalized a rule to clean up pollution from diesel vehicles. It's also developing a rule to clean up the power plants that contribute to Baltimore's dirty skyline. The agency says it expects that rule, which is scheduled to be finished this spring, will mean that many cities won't need to do as much to clean up their local pollution.

But Snyder is skeptical.

"We are not as optimistic about that," he says. "EPA needs to consider stricter controls. ... The cities which produce pollution need to be held responsible for control of that pollution. That's simply fair."

In the meantime, he's considering how to cut particulate in his own backyard. One possibility is encouraging diesel vehicles to adopt pollution filters. Another is to slap stricter controls on factories. Neither option is cheap, but that doesn't mean the state won't try them.

"The name of the game for both EPA and the (states) is to protect public health to the greatest degree possible," says Snyder "This is the start of the process."

[EPA Web site](#)

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